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Rushdie's Postmodern Nations

This paper argues that *Midnight's Children* allegorizes India in two ways. First, the allegory of Saleem Sinai's body speaks about the official version of India, the pedagogical nation that is *modern* by definition, since it aims to parade as a transcendental, seamless, and disembodied master narrative. Second, the dissonant "noise" of the midnight's children attempts to provide an alternative: their miraculous community allegorizes an enchanting yet fragile *postmodern* nation, which reintroduces the voice of the subject into national discourses. This second allegory depicts India as an "elephantiasic" imagined community, which, even though it aims to act as an alternative, inherits the structure of the modern nation, and falls apart precisely for this reason. Unable to redefine the modern paradigm, the novel attempts to reconcile the postmodern nation with it, which overburdens this miraculous yet feeble entity. Therefore, the postmodern nation remains an enchanting but never fulfilled promise in the novel.

Salman Rushdie's nations are by no means easily definable categories. Though *Midnight's Children* is often read as a novel about India,¹ and *Shame* as a scandalous account of Pakistani affairs,² the nations these novels depict are hardly recognizable for Indian or Pakistani readers.³ They are as obscure as postmodernism, Rushdie's Indian critics tend to say;⁴ or, perhaps, as daring. It is hard to deny that

1. See for instance Mark Williams, "The Novel As National Epic: Wilson Harris, Salman Rushdie, Keri Hulme," in *The Commonwealth Novel since 1960*, ed. Bruce King (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1981), 185–97; Joseph Swann, "East Is East and West Is West? Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as an Indian Novel," ed. Viney Kirpal, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s* (New Delhi: Allied, 1990), 251–62, etc.

2. See for instance Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1994); Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (New York: St. Martin, 1989); etc.

3. G.R. Taneja, R.K. Dhawan, ed., *The Novels of Salman Rushdie* (New Delhi: Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1992). S. K. Tikoo, for instance, writes that Rushdie "selects his material from history, and then fantasizes it, and by doing so, converts Pakistan into something like *Peccavistan*. This is what he calls the palimpsest on the real, existing country" (Taneja, p. 52); O. P. Matur also argues that "[t]he Pakistani reality is [. . .] very much there: it has only been tilted 'at a slight angle'" (Taneja, p. 87).

4. Aijaz Ahmad, the well-known Marxist critic, for instance, calls postmodernism a futile intellectual game, which is unable to solve vital social questions, such as mapping

these novels have an ambitious aim: nothing less than reconciling a profoundly *postmodern* framework with the category of the *modern* nation. A tantalizing venture, no doubt, since these entities are antagonistic by definition: the nation, being the product of modernity, as historians such as Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner argue,⁵ has no place in postmodern discourses, which question the very assumptions it relies on.⁶ Yet Rushdie's novels seem to be interested exactly in such risky and challenging endeavours, as if they were infected by a disease called "elephantiasis," as Saleem Sinai puts it.⁷ I argue that *Midnight's Children* depicts India as such an "elephantiasic" entity, which inherits the structure of the modern nation, and falls apart precisely for this reason. Unable to redefine the modern paradigm, the novel attempts to reconcile it with postmodern narrative strategies, and this overburdens this miraculous yet fragile "imagined community."⁸ Therefore, in the novel the nation remains an enchanting yet never fulfilled promise.

Though a number of critics regard Rushdie as one of the most distinctive postmodern writers (e.g. Keith Wilson,⁹ Jean-Pierre Durix,¹⁰ Tamás Bényei,¹¹ M. D.

power relations in society: "[w]ithin a postmodernist intellectual milieu where texts are to be read as the utterly free, altogether hedonistic play of the signifier, I can well empathise with a theoretical operation that seeks to locate the production of texts within a determinate, knowable field of power and signification" (Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 [1987] 3–25, p. 22). See also Ahmad, *In Theory*.

5. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992); etc.

6. My concept of the postmodern relies on Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988) and Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992). Hutcheon argues that the postmodern is "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (Hutcheon, p. 4), using the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe this paradoxical poetics: a new postmodern genre, which is "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[s] claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, p. 5).

7. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage, 1981) p. 75. All parenthesised references are to this edition.

8. The term comes from Benedict Anderson, who argues that the nation "is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, p. 6).

9. Keith Wilson, "Midnight's Children and Reader Responsibility," in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. M. D. Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 55–68.

10. Jean-Pierre Durix, "Magic Realism in *Midnight's Children*," in *Commonwealth: Essays and Studies* 8.1 (1985) 57–63.

Fletcher,¹² Linda Hutcheon,¹³ Sabrina Hassumani¹⁴), his novels are often read, and heavily criticised, from postcolonial perspectives as well (e.g. Maria Couto,¹⁵ Harish Trivedi,¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha,¹⁷ Fawzia Afzal-Khan,¹⁸ Neil Ten Kortenaar¹⁹). Timothy Brennan put him into the category of “cosmopolitan writers” as early as in 1989, claiming that the very genre that he chooses, the novel, does not fit the needs of third world countries.²⁰ Fletcher also claims that rather than being postcolonial, Rushdie’s fiction is “primarily postmodern writing of a humorous and biting variety.”²¹ According to Kortenaar, however, Rushdie is a “nationalist cosmopolitan,” since nationalism and cosmopolitanism are fully compatible in India.²² He resists putting his work into either category, and does not even use these terms in his book;

11. Tamás Béneyei, *Apokrif iratok: Mágikus realista regényekről* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1997).

12. M. D. Fletcher, “Introduction” in *Reading Rushdie*, 1–22.

13. Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism*.

14. Sabrina Hassumani, *Salman Rushdie: A Postmodern Reading of His Major Works*, (London: Associated UP, 2002).

15. Maria Couto, “*Midnight’s Children* and Parents,” *Encounter* 58.2 (1982) 61–6.

16. Harish Trivedi, “Salman the Funtoosh: Magic Bilingualism in *Midnight’s Children*,” in *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1985).

17. Homi K. Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990). Bhabha is one of those few postcolonial theorists who instead of criticising Rushdie regards *The Satanic Verses* as a profound postcolonial intervention into “Englishness”: the novel “attempts to redefine the boundaries of the western nation, so that the ‘foreignness of languages’ becomes the inescapable cultural condition for the enunciation of the mother-tongue” (Bhabha, p. 317).

18. Fawzia Afzal-Khan, *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel: Genre and Ideology* in R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Salman Rushdie. (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1993).

19. Neil Ten Kortenaar, “*Midnight’s Children* and the Allegory of History,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 26.2 (1995) 41–62; Neil Ten Kortenaar, *Self, Nation, Text in Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children* (Montreal: McGill, 2004).

20. “[T]he novel has been an elitist and minority form in developing countries when compared to poem, song, television, and film. Almost inevitably it has been the form through which a thin, foreign-educated stratum (however sensitive or committed to domestic political interests) has communicated to metropolitan reading publics, often in translation” (Timothy Brennan, “The National Longing for Form,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Bhabha, p. 56). See also Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*.

21. Fletcher, ed., *Reading Rushdie*, p. 8.

22. Kortenaar, *Self*.

yet when he claims that “[i]t is relatively easy to tell England from India in *Midnight’s Children*, but difficult to distinguish where India stops and Orientalism begins,”²³ it becomes obvious for the reader that he also considers his fiction complicit with Western perspectives (though he never reflects on what orientalism means, or refers to Edward Said). As for Rushdie himself, he has a very optimistic answer: in the essay written in defence of *Midnight’s Children* he claims that Indian writers, “like others who have migrated into the north from the south, are capable of writing from a kind of *double perspective*: because they, we are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society.”²⁴

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that his novels, and the way the nation is depicted in them, do silence subaltern voices.²⁵ My argument, which shows that India in *Midnight’s Children* is akin to the kind of nations Benedict Anderson imagines in his well-known book, supports this fact: even though we might find parallels between the nation in this novel and the Islamic umma, as Teresa Heffernan does,²⁶ the way India is born in *Midnight’s Children* is perfectly reconcilable with the discourse of Western nationalism studies as well. Yet instead of repeating this rather obvious, though undeniably distressing point about the subaltern’s silence, my paper looks at the heuristic attempt this novel makes in order to find a space for the modern nation, this promising yet fragile category, in the postmodern literary text.

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The story of *Midnight’s Children* begins in 1947, and the very first page takes the reader right to the moment of India’s independence, which is also the moment when Saleem Sinai, the novel’s narrator, was born. As it later turns out, however,

23. Kortenaar, *Self*, p. 19.

24. Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Penguin, 1991) 9–20 (my emphasis).

25. Since the publication of G. C. Spivak’s famous article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” the argument that the Western academia represses subaltern stories has been widely accepted and often repeated in postcolonial studies; see also Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989); Simon During, “Postmodernism or Post-Colonialism Today,” in *Textual Practice* 1.1 (1987) 32–47; Bart-Moore Gilbert, “Postcolonialism: Between Nationalism and Globalisation? A Response to Simon During,” in *Postcolonial Studies* 1.1 (1998) 49–65; Stephen Slemon, “Modernism’s Last Post,” in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Postcolonialism and Post-Modernism*, ed. Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 1–11, etc.

26. Teresa Heffernan, “Apocalyptic Narratives: The Nation in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*,” in *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 46.4 (2000) 470–91.

during the magic hour between 12.00 am and 1.00 am, 1001 children were born, the children of midnight, so it is not only Saleem who embodies the Indian nation in the novel, but his 1001 extraordinary siblings as well. Therefore, this fantastic scenario provides two allegories that speak about the Indian nation in *Midnight's Children*: first, the body of Saleem Sinai, which, since the narrator, born exactly at the stroke of midnight, "had been mysteriously handcuffed to history" (9), and second, the voices of midnight's children, the extraordinary concerto of "national unisonance," which literally embodies the imagined community of the Indian nation. Whereas the *body* allegory reflects how official, "pedagogical" national discourses subdue Saleem, to use Homi Bhabha's terms, the *voice* of the children attempts to provide an alternative: a "performative" vision of India defined by a profound magical wholeness.²⁷ Unlike the first allegory, which only desires to control the subject, the miraculous community attempts to give voice to the children's silenced stories. The fact that it fails seems to be of secondary importance compared to this heroic endeavour.

The Embodied Nation

Let us first consider the allegory of Saleem's body, which becomes the "official" allegory of the Indian nation in *Midnight's Children*. The narrator informs the reader on the very first page of the novel that he has been mysteriously yet irrevocably summoned to become the representative of the newly born Indian nation:

Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came. Oh, spell it out, spell it out: at the precise instant of India's arrival at independence, I tumbled forth into the world. There were gaps. And, outside the window, fireworks and crowds. A few seconds later, my father broke his big toe; but his accident was a mere trifle when set beside what had befallen me in that benighted moment, because thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. (9)

27. The terms "pedagogical" and "performative" come from Homi Bhabha. He argues that the address of the nation is split: "We then have a contested cultural territory where the people must be thought in a double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process" (p. 297).

The first word already evokes the image of the body (“clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came”), subtly striking a religious chord and calling to mind the image of praying, which endows the newly born nation with transcendental importance, besides suggesting that the “hands” of the clock, similarly to Saleem’s body, become helplessly subdued by a power quite inconceivable and beyond its poor, earthly “target.” Then we learn that Saleem’s father accidentally broke his big toe in that benign moment; his body also suffers the consequences of midnight, similarly to Saleem’s, though his punishment is a “mere trifle” set beside what had befallen him, who will bear the burden of his magic “gift” all through his life: “thanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously *handcuffed* to history, my destinies indissolubly *chained* to those of my country” (9). The image of the chained body, being literally handcuffed, illuminates how *Midnight’s Children* envisages the place of Saleem in the nation: he becomes the representative of India as an enchained creature, since his body, paradoxically, both allegorizes the nation and becomes its helplessly subdued part, as the gesture of handcuffing suggests. His passive, feeble body is handcuffed to the nation, which leaves Saleem entirely *silenced*, “without a say in the matter”: “For the next three decades, there was to be no escape. Soothsayers had prophesised me, newspapers celebrated my arrival, politicians ratified my authenticity. I was left entirely without a say in the matter” (9).

At the same time we also learn that Saleem is 31 years old when he starts to narrate the tale of his life, which is, of course, also the tale of India: “Now, however, time (having no further use for me) is running out. I will soon be thirty-one years old. Perhaps. If my crumbling, over-used body permits” (9). Being 31 years old and overtly conscious about his time running out, Saleem seems to be preparing for his final day of reckoning; thus it is not only the praying clock-hands at his birth that evoke religious overtones; but his Christ-like “last supper,” the very text we are reading, also endows his life with religious significance. His body is, however, not the only one in the novel that becomes subdued by religious rituals: in another episode, still in the very first chapter, we learn how Saleem’s grandfather, Aadam Aziz, lost his belief after an act of unsuccessful praying; the act subdues his body, just like handcuffing subdued Saleem. We see Aziz standing in front of the prayer-mat, “his *hands*, guided by old memories, fluttered upwards, *thumbs* pressed to *ears*, *fingers* spread,” he sinks “to his *knees*” (11; my emphasis), attempts to pray, but a tussock smites him “upon the point of his *nose*” (12; my emphasis), as a result of which he becomes “unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve” (12). That is, the act of subduing the body, performed both “by the nation” embodied in “blandly saluting” clock-hands and the prescribed Islamic religious ritual, also speaks about how these acts become intertwined, how the “nation’s ges-

ture" also takes up religious significance, and how the national discourse puts Saleem into a semi-religious, transcendental, Messianic position, which, at the same time, requires total submission. In other words, the body allegory, which acts as the pedagogical allegory of the nation, becomes messianic speech, similarly to the discourse of the teleological, modern nation, turning Saleem into a messiah who bears the burden of its heavy demands.

In another episode, Saleem's body literally becomes transformed into the body of India. During a geography lesson, the half-mad teacher, Mr Zagallo, who is terribly frustrated by the pupils' absence from class, takes his revenge by asking a question that almost none of them can answer. Poor Saleem, trying to help one of his classmates whom Zagallo is ruthlessly torturing, unfortunately calls attention to himself and becomes the target of the frustrated teacher's anger. Unable to explain what "human geography" is, Saleem's very body becomes the explanation, the straightforward, "corporeal" answer to Zagallo's question: "You don't see?" he guffaws. 'In the face of thees ugly ape you don't see the whole map of *India*? [. . .] See here – the Deccan peninsula hanging down!' [. . .] 'These stains,' he cries, 'are Pakistan! Thees birthmark on the right ear is the East Wing; and thees horrible stained left cheek, the West! Remember, stupid boys: Pakistan ees a stain on the face of *India*!' " (231–32). Saleem's very face becomes a map of the Indian nation, a sort of elementary nucleus in the Foucauldian sense, against which power strikes, subduing individuals. The handcuffed silent material, then, the site of semi-religious entitlements, is painfully reminded of his "messianic" role as the allegorical figure of the Indian nation throughout the text.

It is no wonder that bodies tend to crack and fall apart in the novel. Unable to bear the burden of representing the nation, Saleem's body is also visibly cracking while he is narrating the novel, and apocalyptically disintegrates in the last chapter, thus literally becoming transformed into letters, into the very novel itself. Already in the third chapter Saleem discovers that his body, "buffeted by too much history" (37), is falling apart: "I ask you only to accept (as I have accepted) that I shall eventually crumble into (approximately) six hundred and thirty million particles of anonymous, and necessarily oblivious dust" (37). The body, endowed with the miraculous yet heavy burden of representing the nation, cannot bear this weight for very long; Saleem's disintegration into six hundred and thirty million particles, which refers to the population of India, is the direct result of his sacred role, which imposes an artificial homogeneity upon the otherwise heterogeneous material. In another episode, after his body has been mutilated in a number of ways, Saleem realises that this supposed homogeneity is a myth that hides a more chaotic and painful entity which might erupt to the surface at any moment. After a slamming door chops off the top third of his middle finger, and he needs a blood transfusion, it turns out that Saleem's blood group

matches neither of his parents'. The accident reveals that he is not "his" parents' son, and, therefore, not the "real" midnight's child (the baby was exchanged in the hospital by Mary Pereira, who had reasons of her own to challenge history). Saleem realises that the supposed homogeneity of the body, as well as his "identity," are nonexistent categories: the body is, apparently, "homogeneous as anything. Indivisible, a one-piece suit, a sacred temple, if you will. It is important to preserve this wholeness. But the loss of my finger [. . .] has undone all that. [. . .] Uncork the body, and God knows what you permit to come tumbling out. Suddenly you are forever other than you were" (237). The body is envisaged here as a "sacred temple," which is, again, a religious metaphor, the worthy heir of the praying clock-hands of midnight, a homogeneous "one-piece suit," yet what it contains, his very blood, challenges this sacred totality, making him alienated from his very self.

Similarly to Saleem's, his grandfather's body also disintegrates in the novel. After losing his belief in an unsuccessful attempt at praying (when, while trying to enact the prescribed religious ritual, a tussock hits his nose and he resolves "never to kiss the earth for any god or man," 10), which leaves a permanent hole "in a vital inner chamber" (10), Aadam Aziz constructs his entire secular and modern life as a proud attempt to ignore this hole, infuriating his highly religious and bigoted wife. The hole inside, however, starts to demand attention in his declining years, which his grandson, Saleem, the "true" heir of holes and substitutes, immediately notices: "What leaked into me from Aadam Aziz: a certain vulnerability to women, but also its cause, the hole at the centre of himself caused by his (which is also my) failure to believe or disbelieve in God. And something else as well – something which, at the age of eleven, I saw before anyone else noticed. My grandfather had begun to crack" (275). Aziz's body starts to crack since he is no longer able to conceal the fact that his entire life has been constructed as an attempt to hide this hole and dedicated to finding substitutes, such as women, whose semi-transcendental significance is simply due to the fact that the hole has apparently retained the power of bestowing such qualities upon anything that happens to occupy it. Saleem, who inherits his grandfather's hole, becomes a silent and passive subject; besides being handcuffed to the nation, he will also be handcuffed to a "holey" inheritance, and the substitute he is going to find, despite his reference to women in the quotation above, who have never really been able to fill his hole inside, will be the *voices* of midnight's children: "Women have fixed me all right, but perhaps they were never central – perhaps the place which they should have filled, the hole in the centre of me which was my inheritance from my grandfather Aadam Aziz, was occupied for too long by my voices" (192). The voice of the children, then, will act as a "magic glue" trying to mend the disintegration that pervades the entire novel, serving as a remedy that temporarily reduces the pain inflicted upon his body by the pedagogical national allegory.

Saleem is not only handcuffed to the nation, his body is not simply dumb matter which enacts what clock-hands demand, but he also becomes the *mirror* of India. After his magic birth, his parents receive a letter from the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, congratulating him on the happy "accident" of his birth: "Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own" (122). Whereas handcuffing implies speechless subjection, mirroring suggests a certain insight into the totality of the Indian nation, though the mirror, similarly to the handcuffed body, remains dumb matter, a medium that passively "reflects" the will of others. The fact that Saleem becomes the "newest bearer" of the "ancient face of India" (emphases added) suggests that his body, put in the place of the image in the mirror, bears the double burden of the ambivalent temporality of the modern nation, manifested in its Janus-faced desire to turn towards the future yet simultaneously evoke "corresponding pasts," to use Walter Benjamin's term,²⁸ in order to legitimate its all too profane novelty.²⁹ As an eternally-young-yet-ancient-nation, Saleem's body is destined to embody the nation as a seamless "creature" with a heroic past, which is, nonetheless, also "eternally young." His body is entitled to become perfect, since he literally becomes the semi-transcendental mirror image of the nation; yet, with the very same gesture, he is also emptied of subjectivity, deprived of the basic sense of seeing the boundaries of his very own self. It is only such a perfect yet depthless imago that can counteract the tensions that haunt the modern nation; yet it is also no wonder that such an image, being empty inside, cannot bear the burden of its all too heavy perfection for long. The mirror cracks, just like Saleem's body, as well as the Indian nation, and the reader does not find her/himself in Alice's wonderland, stepping through mirrors into the magic realm that lies beyond; the emptiness which the construction conceals will return, just like the hole in Aadam Aziz's body.

Defined by silence(ing), subjection, corporeality, perfection, transcendence, and the stubborn denial of cracks, holes, and any kind of subjectivity, the pedagogical discourse of the nation constructs the subject as an all-too-perfect creature who unavoidably disintegrates under the burden of his role. Perhaps this is not the aim of the nation's discourse; perhaps its only desire is to postulate the possibility of an

28. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1999).

29. For the conflicting impulses of the Janus-faced nation see Anderson; Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neonationalism* (London: Verso, 1981); Mark Redfield, "Imagi-Nation: The Imagined Community and the Aesthetics of Mourning," *Diacritics* 29.4 (1999) 58–83.

identity, or, in other words, to provide the promise of an untingered selfhood. Yet the side effect of this discourse is nonetheless that the desired selfhood turns into its exact opposite, and the empty imago of Saleem's body cracks in the mirror. Any form of subjectivity appears to be too imperfect for this discourse, which relies on the notion of a universal, omnipotent Cogito, as in Benedict Anderson: the nation is seen as an "imagined community," yet the agent who performs this act is strangely missing.³⁰ The omnipotent Cartesian Cogito, which defines the age of modernity as well as the modern nation, and which exercises a powerful imagination yet seems to be incapable of uttering a word, retains its omnipotence exactly at the price of his or her subjectivity. Therefore, the pedagogical nation in the novel, manifested in the apparently perfect yet underneath cracking body, is modern by definition.

Magic Voices

The children's magic voices start to speak about the nation only in the second book of the novel. Saleem, though he becomes aware of the burden of his miraculous birth at an early age, does not know that he is not the only chosen "son" until his 10th birthday. The discovery of the children's voices, which is also the moment when the second national allegory inscribes itself into the text, takes place in an utterly profane, dirty, almost obscene place: in a washing chest. Saleem, who is continuously humiliated by his family, classmates, and relatives, and who becomes less and less able to deal with their overwhelming expectations, finds his most comfortable hiding place in the family's washing chest. This place appears to be a "hole in the world," a space curiously deprived of history, blind and semi-amnesiac, and, therefore, quite safe:

There are no mirrors in a washing-chest; rude jokes do not enter it, nor pointing fingers. The rage of fathers is muffled by used sheets and discarded brassières. A washing-chest is a hole in the world, a place which civilization has put outside itself, beyond the pale; this makes it the finest of hiding-places. In the washing-chest, I was like Nadir Khan in the underworld, safe from all the pressures, concealed from the demands of parents and history. (156)

The mirrors that identified Saleem so ruthlessly as the bearer of the ancient face of India are missing here. "The rage of fathers" seems to have evaporated as well; so Saleem feels safe "from the demands of parents and history," ready to leave his role as a midnight's child behind. In his attempt to hide from the symbolic role

30. Anderson, p. 6.

bestowed upon him Saleem finds a “*hole* in the world,” “which civilization has put outside itself,” an amnesiac, forbidden, dirty, and *secret* place, situated at the very edge of the symbolic world.

The way he enters this place is also quite telling. Saleem is hiding in several confined spaces which appear to function as Chinese-boxes: first, we have to enter the house, then the bathroom, then the washing chest, and finally, Saleem’s very head (or nose?), and only in this last box, the most secretive, most confined of spaces, can the midnight’s children start to sing their strange concerto: “Pain. And then noise, deafening manytongued terrifying, *inside his head!* ... Inside a white wooden washing-chest, within the dark auditorium of my skull, my nose began to sing” (162, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, the text also appears to follow a similar trail: until this chapter Saleem’s companion, the extremely down to earth narratee, Padma, has been listening to his stories; she, utterly disrespectful of his story-telling, acted as a “check” on his exceedingly imaginative narrative, which she quite often interrupted with sceptical remarks – such as “[b]ut what is so precious . . . to need all this writing-shiting?” (24), “So now that the writery is done, let’s see if we can make your other pencil work!” (39) – and so on. Padma, however, who would clearly have entertained some disbelief concerning the events happening in this most crucial of chapters, has fortunately stormed out of Saleem’s life just before he starts recounting the discovery of the midnight’s children: “It has been two whole days since Padma stormed out of my life. . . . A balance has been upset; I feel cracks widening down the length of my body; because suddenly I am alone, without my necessary ear, and it isn’t enough” (149). The carefully instituted balance that controlled the narrative, acting as a safety valve, is lost, leaving Saleem alone in the vacuum of this most confined of physical spaces, which, in this way, also becomes the least controlled place in the novel.

When he actually articulates the presence of the children’s voice in his head, the loss of balance seems to be complete: the first person narrative shifts into the third person (“[a]nd then noise, deafening manytongued terrifying, *inside **his** head!*”³¹) as if the traumatic experience had induced a semi-schizophrenic state of mind, making Saleem act both as observer and participant in this most magic of moments. The event is a traumatic rupture for Saleem, a momentary black-out (or transcendence?), which is, after all, the logical outcome of leaving behind the authoritative gaze of parents and history. For a split second, Saleem finds himself beyond language, order, and the symbolic, and it is only after the ellipsis of three dots that he and his narrative regain balance, and the text shifts back to the first person: “Inside

31. Emphasis added in bold.

a white wooden washing-chest, within the darkened auditorium of *my* skull, *my* nose began to sing” (162, my emphasis).

Several other factors suggest that the accident is traumatic. First, quite unexpectedly, Saleem’s mother appears in the bathroom. She is, of course, unaware of her son’s presence, and, believing that she is alone, whispers the name of a man who is not Saleem’s father, but Nadir Khan, her former, “half-official” husband. What is more, reminiscing about what they used to do in the badly-lit cellar of her parents’ house, “her hands are moving” (161): “they flutter gladly at her cheeks; they hold her bosom tighter than any brassières; and now they caress her bare midriff, they stray below decks” (161). The aforementioned brassieres return here, and, at this point, become identified with parts of the female body which acts as a spectacle in this scene, as if it literally became the thing that “muffles” the rage of fathers and the demands of history. There is a psychological impulse at work here, as if the image of the sinful (!) female has taken the place of the perfect imago, replacing Saleem-in-the-mirror and occupying the space where “history” has been before. Whereas the previous image was full of promise, purity, and perfection, the body that we encounter here is sinful and transgressive; yet the sight of it nonetheless appears to be quite irresistible for the nine-year-old Saleem. No wonder that the event is traumatic: Saleem experiences exactly what the pure symbolic discourse has denied him thus far: situated in the dirty washing chest, among used sheets and discarded brassieres, the plenitude of the “sacred temple” of the body, the very basis of the national allegory, is exchanged for sin, disorder, and *lack*.

It is at this very moment that the midnight’s children start to produce their strange “noise” in Saleem’s head. His mind becomes “filled with thoughts which have no shape, tormented by ideas which refuse to settle into words” (161), already suggesting that the trope he articulates will order the chaos in his mind into a conceivable “reality,” or, in Paul de Man’s words, will freeze “the hypothesis, or fiction, into fact.”³² When he finally articulates the metaphor, he seems to be evoking the scenario of giving birth:

Pajama-cord rises painfully an inch further up the nostril. But other things are rising, too; hauled by that feverish inhalation, nasal liquids are being sucked relentlessly up up up, nose-goo flowing upwards, against gravity, against nature. Sinuses are subjected to unbearable pressure.... until, inside the nearly nine-year-old head, something bursts. Snot rockets through a breached dam into dark new channels. Mucus, rising higher than mucus was ever intended to rise. Waste fluid, reaching as far, perhaps, as the fron-

32. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982), p. 151.

tier of the brain... there is a shock. Something electrical has been moistened. Pain. And then noise, deafening manytongued terrifying, *inside his head!* (162)

In the washing chest c pajamacord irritates Saleem's nose, sending his "nose-goo" upwards in his nasal passages until it reaches the frontiers of his brain, making him sneeze and his nose "sing" – a very profane act indeed, almost obscenely biological by nature, just like the description of his mother's naked body. The "rising mucus," the unbearable pressure on the sinuses, the metaphor of the "breached dam" and the gesture of bursting evoke the pain and labour involved in the act of giving birth. It's quite ironic that Saleem's biological birth, described on the very first page of the novel, is seen as a less explicitly physical event: when recounting his birth, Saleem uses metaphors such as handcuffing, chaining, and praying clockhands, as if he were trying to elevate his story above such "dirty" matters. Whereas his birth was "silent" ("I was left entirely without a say in the matter"), *noise* seems to be the very thing that is born in the washing chest: the "deafening manytongued terrifying" voice of the children, calling the frantic cry of new born babies in mind. The trope that is "born" here resembles what Steven Connor calls the most profound manifestation of a disorderly, ventriloquial utterance, the direct antithesis of "sonorous omnipotence" of "the Word;" the voice that acts as a semi-demonic noise, proceeding from the demon which has taken up residence" in the human body, producing a "voice that issues from the genitals or anus."³³

The very place where the noise is born, Saleem's nose, is often compared to genitals in the text. Described as the "big cucumber" on Aadam Aziz face, which Saleem also inherits, and which is "wagging like the little one in [his] pajamas" (17), the nose appears to perform the function of the male genital. Described from the beginning as a miraculous organ (as Tai said to Saleem's grandfather, "[f]ollow your nose and you'll go far," 17–18), with "dynasties waiting inside it . . . like snot" (14), in this episode, the nose appears to embody a peculiar androgynous totality: besides acting as the phallus, it also becomes the womb, the very place where the voices are conceived and born. It seems as if the miraculous birth escaped the division that the *modern* nation suffers, and managed to overcome the moment that splits it into a "progressive masculine" and a "regressive feminine" face.³⁴ The moment takes us to

33. Steven Connor, "The Ethics of the Voice" in *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory and Responsibility*, ed. Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods (London: Macmillan, 1999) p. 224.

34. A number of critics argue that the modern nation is split into a feminine and masculine face. Anne McClintock and Nira Yuval-Davis claim that whereas the teleological, progressive pole of the modern nation is gendered as masculine, the nostalgic, backward-looking is usually depicted as a profoundly feminine entity in the fine arts as well as in political discourses.

the limits of language, as Francette Pacteau claims, marking a desire to return to a pre-Oedipal, androgynous sexuality, and thus escape differentiation and the symbolic order.³⁵ This prelapsarian state of existence makes the self feel complete and triumphant; since “the other” is not perceived as a separate entity, the self is not threatened by the horror that the lack (or denial) of recognition causes.

Since the modern nation never recognized the split at its heart, and always wanted to parade as a seamless, transcendental entity, Saleem’s androgynous totality both recalls the modern paradigm and attempts to insert it into a postmodern framework, which is more conscious of the need to articulate subjectivity. The text seems to need this seamless androgynous fantasy to counteract the pedagogical discourse of the nation (i.e., the body allegory); yet a major difference between Saleem’s androgyne and the modern nation is that whereas modernist discourses posit a “universal Cogito” but lack a tangible agent (“the nation is an imagined political community”³⁶) Saleem’s androgynous nation, due to its origin in the children’s “noise,” is not devoid of subjectivity.

The very first messages that Saleem receives aim to reassert the children’s sense of self:

I heard, beneath the polyglot frenzy in my head, those other precious signals, utterly different from everything else, most of them faint and distant, like far-off drums whose insistent pulsing eventually broke through the fish-market cacophony of my voices.... those secret, nocturnal calls, like calling out to like.... The unconscious beacons of the children of midnight, signalling nothing more than their existence, transmitting simply: ‘I.’ From far to the North, ‘I.’ And the South East West: ‘I.’ ‘I.’ ‘And I.’ (168)

The schizophrenic state that enabled Saleem to articulate the noise metaphor seems to give way to a profound vision of transcendence: “below the surface trans-

See Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995).

35. Several critics have investigated the harmonious wholeness that the fantasy of the androgyne designates (Francette Pacteau, Carolyn Heilbrun, etc). As Heilbrun claims, “[a]ndrogyny suggests a spirit of reconciliation between the sexes; it suggests, further, a full range of experience open to individuals who may as women, be aggressive, as men, tender; it suggests a spectrum upon which human beings choose their places without regard to propriety or custom” (x). See Francette Pacteau, “The Impossible Referent: Representation of the Androgyne,” *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Caplan (London: Routledge, 1989) 62–84; Carolyn Heilbrun, *Towards a Recognition of Androgyny* (London: Harper Colophon, 1974).

36. Anderson, p. 6. Emphasis added.

missions [. . .] language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words" (168). The articulation of the I, the self, then, just like the androgynous fantasy, presupposes the fading away of language. It seems that the newly "born" allegory attempts to avoid the symbolic order at all costs; the symbolic has to fade away below the surface of transmissions so that the national allegory could find a space beyond pedagogical discourses. The subject that is born in this process seems to inhabit a space outside language, the symbolic, and the pedagogical, and occupy a curious blind spot, a contradictory and ambivalent "third space."³⁷

The androgynous wholeness, the only space where the subject and the performative nation *hide*, is unable to guarantee a permanent intervention into nationalist pedagogy. It has two fatal flaws. First, the metaphor that is "born" will be unfaithful to its very origin: the allegory is at pains to repress its dirty birth, strangely interwoven with the very nature of the transcendental fantasy; and this forgetting, quite tragically, also does away with transcendence, androgyny, and the nation itself. Second, there are certain flaws in the very structure of the allegory; the androgynous construction itself, which promises to challenge the rigid categories of the modern nation, is unable to redefine gender in a radical way. It is these two flaws, which I discuss in the next section, that fragment the children's miraculous nation in the novel, making it fall apart after its transient yet heroic existence.

Voice and Sound

The genealogy of the noise metaphor illuminates how Saleem's nation attempts to forget its very origin. The trope that Saleem finally articulates seems to be a "blind metaphor," to use de Man's term,³⁸ which, if it means anything at all, refers to the very indeterminacy of its own meaning. First, the metaphor evokes the circumstances of its very birth: Saleem's fear, a totally subjective experience, which explains why he perceives the voices as "deafening manytongued terrifying"; the act of naming results from Saleem's ecstatic state of mind, hardly relying on any "objective facts," since, as it later turns out, the voices of the children are not terrifying at all, but become, after a little effort paid by Saleem, intelligible speech. The metaphor seems to have no clue as to what it names: Saleem is not aware of the children's existence yet, thus the "noise" evokes no referent except for the vague image of the crying new-born child. The "Midnight's Children's Conference," the children's

37. The term comes from Homi K Bhabha. See Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: An Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 207–221.

38. De Man, p. 151.

nightly democratic assembly, will become the metaphor's vehicle, and the Indian nation will be its tenor, but Saleem is far from being aware of these at this stage. The "noise" that he hears is perhaps the ground of comparison at its best, but it is not yet aware of the things that it compares.

After its birth, the trope starts its pilgrimage to redefine itself, as if it wanted to forget its traumatic origins: the unacknowledged, unclaimed experience in the washing chest.³⁹ The first referent that it finds is a transcendental, religious one: Saleem thinks that he can hear the voices of archangels, which he proudly announces to his family: "I heard voices yesterday. Voices are speaking to me inside my head. I think – Ammi, Abboo, I really think – that Archangels have started to talk to me" (164). The blow he gets from his father after his revelation makes him renounce his role as a Prophet, and he immediately starts to look for a new meaning of the noise. At this point he realizes that his voices, far from being sacred, are "as profane, and as multitudinous, as dust" (168), and instead of the sublime messages transmitted through Archangels, what he hears are "the inner monologues of all so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike" (168). Nevertheless, despite their profane nature, Saleem's voices seem to have preserved their transcendental aspects: they transmit "thought-forms which far *transcended* words . . . the unconscious *beacons* of the children of midnight" (168, my emphasis). Both the transcendence involved in the transmissions and the beacon metaphor suggest that Saleem's voices, despite their mundane nature, have managed to preserve the semi-religious transcendence characteristic of Archangelic utterances. This rhetoric, obviously, appeals to national pedagogy to a great extent: drawing our attention away from its ambiguous origins, the noise is becoming clear, pure, and messianic.

Finally, Saleem discovers the existence of the children on his tenth birthday, due to a bicycle accident. He wants to show off his skills to the American Evie Burns, the girl he admires for her mastery of all kinds of bicycles, but, in fact, he is cycling for the first time in his life, and, unable to find the brake, crashes into his friend, Sonny Ibrahim. This accident brings the miracle of midnight to completion; similarly to the accident in the washing chest, Saleem's head is injured ("Sonny's head greeted mine," 187), as if the head, the symbol of rationality and the thinking Cogito, had to be violated so that the miraculous vision could be born (no wonder that Padma, the very principle of materialism, is absent when the accidents happen). The Midnight Children's Conference is, then, the result of a chain of accidents that persistently deny any trace of rational judgement.

39. For the notion of trauma as "unclaimed experience" see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996).

With the birth of the conference, we see a conference room, a “parliament chamber” (298), an image that gives shape to formless “noise.” This “parliamentary chamber,” however, is not the missing vehicle of the noise metaphor: “nothing but trouble outside my head, nothing but *miracles* inside it” (207, my emphasis), writes Saleem, signalling that the terrifying noise is now perceived as a miracle. Fear and dissonance seem to have disappeared, similarly to the dirty and sinful scenario that surrounded the trope’s birth, as well as the memory of the two painful accidents. When the allegory of the nation acquires a shape, its very founding metaphor is redefined; the dirty washing chest disappears, as well as the fear and terror that led to its very articulation, as if the trope had forgotten that it originates in guilt and transgression. The metaphor seems to have been purified during its search for meaning.

This is perhaps the biggest mistake that the performative nation makes. Forgetting its very genealogy, the noise wants to become a miraculous voice, a pure and sonorous utterance; when Saleem claims that “‘I heard voices yesterday. Voices are speaking to me inside my head. I think – Ammi, Abboo, I really think – that Archangels have started to talk to me’ ” (164), he is already guilty of sanctifying and harmonizing dissonance, since, in this way, the painful yet miraculous subjectivity involved in this discourse, the very subjectivity that the androgynous birth created, disappears, and the allegory gradually becomes transformed into an image that is not very far from those that pedagogical discourses produce. The voice attempts to be perfect, just like Saleem’s empty imago in the mirror, identified by the prime minister as representative of India, and this desire gradually moves the discourse of the performative nation towards pedagogical realms.

The difference between *sound* (or noise) and *voice* captures the subtle dividing line between these discourses, which is also the dividing line between the performative and pedagogical nation in the novel. These are differentiated in the very moment that allows the intrusion of the symbolic order into the midnight’s children’s discourse: after the semi-articulate and transcendent “I” starts to designate the Indian nation, the miraculous community also falls apart:

The gradual disintegration of the Midnight’s Children’s Conference – which finally fell apart on the day the Chinese armies came down over the Himalayas to humiliate the Indian fauj – was already well under way. [. . .] Up in Kashmir, Narada-Markandaya was falling into the solipsistic dreams of the true narcissist, concerned only with the erotic pleasures of sexual alterations [. . .] And the sisters from Baud were content with their ability to bewitch fools young and old. ‘What can this Conference help?’ they inquired. ‘We already have too many lovers.’” (254)

When the transcendental signals become intelligible speech, and the sound is replaced by the self-conscious voice, the disintegration is unavoidable. According to Saleem, this is due to a loss that the symbolic world imposes upon the community: “If there is a third principle, its name is childhood. But it dies; or rather, it is murdered” (256). The text postulates childhood and sound as pre- or semi-symbolic states, whereas voice acts as the self-conscious, “proprietary” notion that Steven Connor defines as “the sign of a person’s self-belonging.”⁴⁰ As opposed to the noise that was magical but blind of its potentials, voice designates a self-conscious but pedagogical dimension of identity.

Another episode that illuminates the difference between sound and voice is the one that tells about the short career of Mian Abdullah, the Hummingbird. Abdullah, founder and chairman of the Free Islam Convocation, similarly to Saleem, offers an alternative: his Convocation aims at founding a peaceful and moderate community for the Muslim population of India. Called “optimism disease” by Saleem’s grandfather, who is continuously whistling as a demonstration of his having caught the virus, Abdullah’s humming evokes an inarticulate, “demonic” noise, which is similar to Saleem’s noise. His followers are called “expert ventriloquists” (45): “Abdullah had the strange habit of humming without a pause, humming in a strange way, neither musical nor unmusical, but somehow mechanical, the hum of an engine or dynamo. . .” (46). The episode also underlines the fact that this noise, despite its dirty and underground nature, or, perhaps, exactly because of it, acts as an entity that promises an alternative, similarly to the guilty noise that Saleem discovers in the washing chest.

In *Midnight’s Children* the most obvious manifestation of voice is the singing of Saleem’s sister, Jamila. After the family moves to Pakistan, for political reasons, they discover the talent of the fifteen-year-old girl, previously called the “Brass Monkey.” Her real name was so much overshadowed by the Monkey in her that Saleem has not even mentioned it before; it is only in this episode that she becomes transformed into “Jamila Singer,” and her new name already indicates that, similarly to the noise of midnight’s children, her Monkey-self becomes replaced by a new image that is not quite faithful to its own genealogy. She becomes a national hero, “Pakistan’s Angel,’ ‘The Voice of the Nation,’ the ‘Bulbul-e Din’ or nightingale of the faith” (313), and, unlike the hesitant sound that founded the children’s allegory, her voice speaks about “blind and blinding devoutness” (314) and “right or wrong nationalism” (314). Like Saleem, she is also addressed by the President, entitling her to act as the official representative of the Pakistani nation: “Jamila daughter,’ we heard, ‘your voice will be a sword for purity; it will be a weapon with which

40. Connor, p. 227.

we shall cleanse men's souls" (315). She becomes "a superhuman being, [. . .] an angel who sang to her people all days and nights" (314); her golden voice is on "Voice-Of-Pakistan Radio" (314) all the time, literally replacing the "unconscious beacons of the children of midnight" (168) that "All India Radio" transmitted. As Saleem writes, "[m]y nose, her voice: they were exactly complementary gifts; but they were growing apart" (315): his nose, the instinctual container of the noise and the androgynous organ that gives birth to the self, becomes replaced by the pure, sonorous, public and *disembodied* Voice.

Obviously, these two allegories also implicate extra-textual references, Saleem's noise acting as an allegory of India, whereas Jamila's voice as that of Pakistan.⁴¹ (Her allegory already foreshadows how *Shame*, the novel published two years after *Midnight's Children*, imagines Pakistan as a pedagogical, artificially created nation.) Yet these tropes also speak about alternative national discourses, the "complementary gifts" (315) of noise and voice, the pedagogical and performative visions of the nation, and it is certainly not true that India is depicted as a purely miraculous entity whereas Pakistan becomes condemned as a pedagogical venture in the text; as we have seen, the body allegory addresses Saleem as the mirror of India in spectacularly pedagogical ways. The text, in addition to commenting on extra-textual events, also seems to be interested in exploring these alternative modes of speech.

The "birth" of Jamila's allegory suggests a strong parallel between her "golden voice" (313) and Saleem's accidental noise. First, her story revolves around a perforated sheet, which recalls the dirty sheets Saleem found in the washing chest and the talisman he inherited from Aadam Aziz. Jamila's family, unwilling to put the body of their beloved daughter on the stage "in front of God knows how many strange men" (312), need the help of Uncle Puffs, who comes up with a brilliant strategy that helps to make their daughter famous without revealing her face. He devises an all-concealing, white silk chadar, with a three-inch hole cut in the middle, which literally becomes the replica of Saleem's talisman, the perforated sheet through which his grandfather had first glimpsed the body of his wife: "Jamila sang with her lips pressed against the brocaded aperture, [and] Pakistan fell in love with a fifteen-year-old girl whom it only ever glimpsed through a gold-and-white perforated sheet" (313). Just like Saleem, Jamila is hiding in a secret place, yet whereas Saleem discovered the children among dirty sheets and used underwear, Jamila is standing behind a silk chadar, "heavily embroidered in gold brocade-work and religious calligraphy" (313), which literally cuts her voice off from the body that pro-

41. For the discussion of the ambiguous balance *Midnight's Children* creates between being self-referential and evoking extra-textual events see the analysis of Hutcheon, especially chapter 10.

duces it. In contrast with Saleem's noise, which was the very locus of subjectivity, her Voice becomes a disembodied, incorporeal, free-floating, and angelic entity.

Jamila's disembodied voice, though it appears to be a superhuman entity, is one of the best instances of what Connor calls the "proprietary voice."⁴² Its proprietor is, however, not the singing girl, but the collective national "we" that "fills" her voice with reference: when the Pakistani president claims that "your voice will be a sword for purity; it will be a weapon with which we shall cleanse men's souls" (315), he literally appropriates the trope as a militant, pure, and religious metaphor, filling it with a meaning that is supposed to radiate from behind the heavily embroidered perforated sheet. The harmonious and sonorous voice acts as the exact replica of Saleem's face in the mirror: after the perfect body now we encounter the perfect voice, as if the pedagogical discourse aimed at creating a three-dimensional being in the novel. This image, in both cases, while postulating an untouchable and perfect imago, the empty Cogito of the modern nation, entirely lacks any kind of subjectivity, similarly to the modernist discourse of the nation.

In Rushdie's novel, then, the promise of subjectivity, and, therefore, of the performative nation, lies in the accidental and dirty noise. The fact that this allegory fails is due not only to the noise metaphor's unfaithfulness to its own origins, but also to the blind spots inherent in the pre-symbolic, androgynous construction itself. The androgyne proudly ignores the presence of the other in the noise (the presence that will eventually lead to its demise: Shiva, Saleem's greatest enemy, the proper son of midnight, named after the god of destruction, whom Saleem deprives of his birthright, takes revenge on the children's conference). Furthermore, these blind spots also result from a mistake that androgynous constructions often commit – namely, from the masculine pole's desire to appropriate the entire construction for himself.⁴³

First, the role of Saleem's mother in the scenario remains that of the spectacle: Amina Sinai, who enters the bathroom when Saleem is hiding in the washing chest, undressing and reminiscing about her ex-lover, serves as a sinful Eve in this post-modern creation story. The mother's naked body simply triggers the events, while Saleem is busy with the act of creation; and this is indeed what we witness: a peculiar creation of the wor(l)d. The problem is that the terms themselves are not changed; the text fails to redefine gender categories in a radical way. The feminine simply serves as a spectacle, the lack against which the androgynous construction is

42. Connor, p. 227.

43. This is also the mistake Gelpi refers to when she claims that the androgynous vision, while imagining the feminine completing the masculine, often fails to take account of the second possibility: the feminine completed by the masculine (quoted in Brian Attebery, *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 132.

created; and the androgyne itself is too overtly defined by a desire to appropriate the whole structure (akin to Saleem's "urge to encapsulate the whole of reality," 75). The implosion is, therefore, inevitable, since the very terms themselves are incompatible with the gender-conscious argument of the text.

Second, this is the very scenario that becomes repeated in the act of narrating the novel: Saleem, the creator, urged to "encapsulate the whole of reality," narrates his autobiography to Padma, the female listener, named after the "Dung Goddess."⁴⁴ As if intending to bring back the dirt involved in the miracle of the washing chest, writing also becomes "shitting" (as Padma puts it: "what is so precious . . . to need all this writing-shiting?" 24), a dirty yet fertile act, similarly to Padma's very name. By relying on Padma, perhaps Saleem is trying to regain his subjectivity, the very dirty and disarticulate "I" that pedagogical-symbolic constructions constantly attempt to erase.⁴⁵ This grandiose project would guarantee a challenge of nationalist pedagogy, and secure some kind of subjectivity for Saleem, yet this never happens in *Midnight's Children*; he becomes a "broken creature" at the end of the novel, disintegrating in an apocalyptic vision, just like the children's "imagined community," "spilling pieces of itself into the street" (463). Therefore, in the novel the performative nation remains an enchanting yet never fulfilled promise.

44. Several critics read Padma's figure as the epitome of the sexist nature of the novel. According to Heffernan, "Padma, to whom Saleem tells his tale, remains on the periphery of Saleem's story. Her comments are available to the reader but are never incorporated into Saleem's narrative" (p. 482). Or, as Charu Verma claims, Padma's tragedy is that her story is not incorporated in the male narrative; cf. Charu Verma, "Padma's Tragedy: A Feminist Deconstruction of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*," in *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, ed. Sushila Singh (New Delhi: Prestige, 1991), 151–62. Even Brennan remarks that "there is something offensive about the way Rushdie often depicts women, beginning with the images of Padma as *Bharat Mata* and continuing more clearly in the strangely demeaning characterisations of *The Satanic Verses*" (Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, p. 126).

45. For the analysis of Saleem's attempt to regain his self through writing see Bényei.